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ABSTRACT

The program is a series of interviews and montages on the topic of graduation at all levels: high school, college, graduate, and honorary degrees. Among those interviewed are: Caroline Bird, author of "The Case Against College"; Judith Harrison, Maureen Smith, and Frank Meta, graduates; Roy Forbes, Director of the National Assessment of Educational Progress; Samuel Proctor of Rutgers University; Irene Lober, Tom Chaney, and Gary Goff, high school principals discussing minimum competency requirements; and parents. (Author)

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OPTIONS IN EDUCATION is an electronic weekly magazine devoted to coverage of news, features, policy & people in the field of education. The program is available for broadcast to the 185 member stations of National Public Radio.

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GRADUATION: 1976

(OPENING MUSICAL THEME)

BLAIR: I'm Wendy Blair with NPR's OPTIONS IN EDUCATION.

OPTIONS IN EDUCATION is a news magazine about all the issues in education, from the ABC's of preschool to the alphabet soup of government programs. If you've ever been to school, we have something that will interest you.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow. On this edition of OPTIONS IN EDUCATION Reporter David Selvin examines one of the rites of spring.

(MUSIC -- Montage of graduation -- handing out of diplomas -- benediction)

STUDENT: It's really scary, to have to find a job, to not have the security of school to fall back on -- it's a whole new world of different experiences, and I'm very hesitant to take the step.

STUDENT: I don't consider it that scary, though, in terms of going out -- and I've been lucky. I found a job pertinent to my interests and talents, that I want to work with.

STUDENT: I think for at least two years now I've known it would be very difficult to get a job.

STUDENT: I feel pretty fine. The ceremony was entirely too long.

INTERVIEWER: How important do you think it is for you to get this diploma today?

STUDENT: Relative to what?

INTERVIEWER: To getting a job, to the rest of your life.

STUDENT: I'm really not going to worry about that for a month or so.

INTERVIEWER: Why's that?

STUDENT: I'm just going to party for a while.

STUDENT: I finally finished my doctorate.

INTERVIEWER: Is it important as a means to an end or as an end itself?

STUDENT: Gee, I've been so busy writing papers -- I haven't thought of it. It's important as something to do. I guess, even if I were going to be a housewife, I'm glad I did it. But I intend to use it, also.

INTERVIEWER: It's for yourself, then?

STUDENT: Sure -- who else?

(MUSIC)

(Montage of graduation -- handing out of diplomas)

BLAIR: Once again, the traditional graduation season is coming to an end. Last year, we reported that a diploma was no guarantee of getting a job. In fact, the job outlook for graduates was pretty dismal. Well, if anything, this year the situation is worse.

MERROW: The effect of all this is the lessening of a once important and significant ritual for the five million people who are graduating this year from America's high schools, colleges, and graduate schools. Here's the author of The Case Against College, Caroline Bird.

CAROLINE BIRD

BIRD: It used to be that graduation for men and marriage for women were the commencement of adult life. Up to then, why you could play around and experiment. Neither of those milestones is any longer a milestone. It is not a milestone comparable with getting your first driver's license, which goes utterly unritualized. I mean, there should be a ceremony about that. If you've got to have a right of puberty, that's it in this society.

So, graduation actually means -- well, my daughter was graduated from Vassar in 1957, and Carol got married the day after graduation, and a large proportion of her class did. Now, graduation does not mean that for young people. It doesn't mean getting a job for anybody. It doesn't mean getting married. So, for a while, we used to think that it was so wonderful that they were all going on to graduate school. Well, I don't know as we now think it's so wonderful. They are simply attracted to a way of living, and a way of living, incidentally, which the taxpayers find appalling.

STUDENT: Oh, wow, I guess it's the end of a milestone, but the beginning of another.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it's as important as it used to be to get a college degree?

STUDENT: No, not really, because a college degree doesn't mean nothing, really, because there's no guarantee there's going to be a job waiting for you out there. If you don't have any experience, the man is not going to look at you.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that's different than it was ten years ago?

STUDENT: Sure, definitely. You know, five years ago, you got a college degree, you had a good job, but now, a college degree doesn't mean nothing, because you've got too many Ph.D.'s and Masters walking around without jobs, so a B.A. won't do you that much good.

INTERVIEWER: So, what does that mean about a college degree -- does it mean that it's worthless?

STUDENT: It's worth it in a sense, because most people will look at you if you got a degree. But if you don't have one, they won't look at you. It's like a high school education was the thing -- now you got to have a B.A. degree. Next, it's going to be a Ph.D.

BLAIR: More and more people are saying that the economic value of a college degree is questionable. Yet, costs are rising. The overall yearly bill in most public institutions runs about $3,000, and about $4,500 at private schools. And, as the guarantees for getting higher pay and better jobs for schooling diminish, questions like, "Who needs it" are asked more often. Some people, like Caroline Bird, have come to the conclusion that college isn't the job ticket we once thought it was.

CAROLINE BIRD

BIRD: Ten years ago we still had an expanding economy. We still had college recruiters waiting around for every graduate. I think it was beginning to decline, but not noticeably. Then, it did make sense to go to college for the money. Now, of course, it does not make sense to invest the staggering sums that are now required and will be even more staggering in the future, if you're going solely for an increment of income.

In the past four years, if you take the statistics which always deal with the past and not the future, the average that you can expect to get with a college diploma is only forty percent more than the average high school graduate. And that's a decline from 53 percent, something like that, in four years. Now, if you continue downward at that rate, God knows what the people entering college this fall will earn in addition to what they would have earned -- I mean, how they will improve their earning capacity by four years.

And, of course, you've simply got to count that they are off the labor market for four years. In any assessment of the cost of a college education, you have to consider the fact that while you're going to college, at least for the hours that you're supposed to be studying, you're not earning. And this is, of course, the major cost of a college education. It is really not borne by parents, not borne by taxpayers -- it is borne by the student himself, or herself, and while college may, indeed, be a pleasanter place to be, the standard of living in perfectly crass material terms for students, is really a poverty-level existence.

SELVIN: I wonder if that's not our problem, though, for seeing college strictly in terms of a means to an end, a means to a job, or a means to more money.

BIRD: Yes, it's funny -- since I wrote this book, the college educators have been righteously arising and saying, "There's that dreadful woman who thinks that college is just for the money when, of course, that's the farthest thing from our minds -- it's not for the money -- it's because you learn the higher things of life -- your horizons are expanded -- all these wonderful things." The higher things of life have recently been discovered and are being quite lauded by college educators, to which there is a simple answer: I couldn't agree with them more. That's exactly what I'm saying, that the only purpose for going to college is that you like the stuff. You've simply got to regard this as a consumer expenditure, rather than as an investment in future income.

But, two-thirds of the freshmen still say that the hope of nicer work or better-paying work ranks very high in their motivation to go.

SELVIN: Are you saying, in a sense, that colleges are a fraud, inasmuch as implicit in going to college, implicit in making that investment of however much money it is for going four years and getting your degree, there's a promise, or at least, there was a promise of monetary reward?

BIRD: No, it's the utter hypocrisy of educators that turns me off. They will say piously, "We never promised these students anything -- if employers prefer our product, we can't help it." Of course, they've never done anything particularly to disabuse the customers of the magic -- you know, they've sold the sizzle instead of the steaks, just exactly like the advertising people. And I fault them for that, because if the professoriate has a role, it is to be honest. It is to analyze all these wonderful things that they say they're going to confer on you -- you know, objective analysis. They simply do not turn upon themselves -- they regard themselves as a privileged, special, and unaccountable sector of the population.

Really, you cannot expect doctors or lawyers or college professors to hold themselves accountable.

SELVIN: More and more people are going to college, and I think you're suggesting that too many people are going to college, but what about the sort of social benefits of that -- it creates a kind of egalitarianism, I think?

BIRD: It may be, as so often happens in social affairs, that the real benefits to society are not at all the ones who are anticipated. And that the real impact is going to be in the opposite direction of what we expected. I'd be happy to talk about some of the things I think really are going on on college campuses -- college may be a giant experiment in new ways of living which will catch on, in informal living, in sort of group consensus, in new ways of people relating to each other. It certainly has been experimental in sex relations. I mean, a new non-family. You see, to most kids going to college the salient things of college is that it is not family living. The real motivation is negative -- I want to get away from home.

And, so, they are dumped into a society in which they plow around more or less as equals, experimenting with relationships of all kinds, not only sexual ones -- living arrangements. It's very hard to explain to people like my husband, for instance, that these boys and girls who are "shacking up" are not sleeping together and, yet, I believe that they aren't -- an awful lot of them -- not that they don't sleep with somebody, but not necessarily their roommates, you see. It's inconceivable to somebody brought up the way my husband was. Well, the impact on family life and private life of four years of living without commitments may be incalculable.

MERROW: Caroline Bird, author of <u>The Case Against College</u>, talking with David Selvin.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any different ideas about why you came to college and what college is for now, than you did when you first started it?

STUDENT: I think the key for me was knowing exactly what it was I wanted to learn. I wanted to learn how

to draw, and I wanted to learn how to analyze literature -- my two majors, Art and French. And I found that by approaching it that way with a real specific intention, the teachers were much more receptive. There are a number of students in most classes, it seems, who have no specific direction, or they don't specifically want to learn what that teacher is teaching.

INTERVIEWER: Was it your fault, and is it their fault, or is it somehow the fault of the system that we go through?

STUDENT: I think I was in the same position the first time I went to school, and I think it has a lot to do with the pressure of going to school. If there are certain jobs you want, if you're from a certain background, you automatically go to college. And that was the way it was with me -- both of my parents are college teachers. There wasn't really much question. And I think a lot of people are here doing it because they're supposed to do it and not really knowing specifically.

INTERVIEWER: You're graduating now. What does that represent to you at the moment?

STUDENT: Well, to me it's a personally satisfying thing just to look back and see how much I've learned; in terms of the degrees, I guess, it's not really terribly important. I'll probably be a waitress again the way I was before. So, I'm afraid B.A.'s are not worth very much.

INTERVIEWER: What about the ritual of graduation itself? How do you feel about that, now that you've earned it?

STUDENT: I feel nothing about it. It's neither here nor there. I don't want to spend the whole day in the hot sun, and that's about the total feeling I have. In that respect, I have no sense of allegiance to my class or to the university or any -- you know, I don't feel that I've fulfilled anything with them that I want to celebrate with them. It's my own personal accomplishment, I feel. When I'm done, I'll leave, and that's the end of that.

INTERVIEWER: College and graduation -- it's a ritual, I guess, and you enter into a sort of womanhood/manhood, especially in college, at least of the marketplace. Does all this education, all these graduations that have brought you to this point, really prepare you for that?

STUDENT: That's a good question. I think as a side product, partly out of learning to discipline yourself and out of learning what you're able to do, creatively or imaginatively - your own resources - that hopefully by the time you've gone through a

certain amount of education, you've learned what it is about yourself that's unique in that respect, and that's what makes for strong individuals, I think, is that sense of self. Whether the institution gives you that, or you develop that in spite of it, I don't know.

BLAIR: David Selvin, speaking to Judith Harrison, who chose not to attend her own graduation.

MERROW: Graduation is an ideal time to ask just how well our schools are doing. Are our children really getting a good education? The federal government spends a lot of money measuring how schools are doing in their efforts to educate. The test is called "The National Assessment of Educational Progress," and it costs nearly $5 million annually. The National Assessment measures the academic performance of 900,000 students in four age groups -- 9, 13, and 17-year-olds, and young adults. It covers areas like writing, science, social studies, music, and citizenship.

BLAIR: John talked with National Assessment Director, Dr. Roy H. Forbes, recently in Denver, Colorado.

MERROW: Okay, here we are graduating another graduating class -- the class of '76 -- how are we doing?

DR. ROY H. FORBES

FORBES: A lot of people are very concerned about the decline in the SAT and ACT scores.

MERROW: What are they?

FORBES: The SAT is a test that is given to a graduating senior from high school. The scores are used by some universities and colleges to predict how well the student's going to do. And that's the key word -- these tests are set up to predict how someone's going to do at college.

The ACT is another test which is administered in the same way that the SAT's are administered. They have been reporting a decline now since about '67 or '68 -- in the last several years, it's really been declining. But we have to remember that that particular group is not representative of all seniors that are graduating from high school across the country. It's only that select group that is taking that test and planning to go ahead to college. There's a lot of guessing going on as to why that's declining.

The National Assessment data in some ways support the decline, and in some ways, it contradicts those declining scores.

MERROW: Let me ask the question -- to keep on getting you to answer the same question. Here we are graduating another class of seniors -- again - how are we doing in other areas?

FORBES: The second area that we assessed for the second time was writing. Now, that's an interesting one, and the press has picked up what we reported to be the decline, except there was a positive side to that one, also. If one looks at writing as how well a person spells, how well they use punctuation, the way they use words in agreement, and things of that nature, over the four year period, between the two assessments, there was no change in those types of basics. One may argue there are still a number of people that do not do those well, so we still shouldn't be satisfied. But the fact is

there was no change and, hence, no decline, which would be kind of contradictory to some of the other things that were reported.

The decline that was very widely reported in writing, based on our results, was based around how well people can write paragraphs -- the coherence of a paragraph. And in that particular area, the nine-year-olds improved a little bit. From a statistical point of view, it wasn't significant. But for both 13 and 17-year-olds there was a decline. Now, the scoring technique that we used is based on some very traditional writing approaches -- the way in which television, radio, newspapers, magazines, write and present things is quite different from the standard way of writing. And, so, the way in which the 17 and 13-year-olds seem to be writing now reflects more the other style.

So, if you've got a decline in writing based on one particular scoring technique, there's still a question - has the decline in the ability of the student to communicate gone down? We don't have an answer to that one.

MERROW: Is the National Assessment challenging any of the cliches about Blacks, about women, about poor people, about people who live in rural areas?

FORBES: No -- and that's a concern, I think, for everyone in education in this country. Our data will help to show the same types of correlations that exist -- low achievement - Blacks, low achievement - inner-city, low achievement - extreme rural, low achievement - southeast, a lot of areas, low achievement - females. So, it kind of supports a lot of things that people have thought for a long time. I get rather impatient and irritated with people that are suggesting that those are variables that schools can't do anything about.

MERROW: You think schools can affect those?

FORBES: Very definitely, and I think it's only when we can start destroying the correlations I just mentioned -- those relationships between lower achievement and other things, that we can actually say we're providing equal educational opportunity in this country.

MERROW: But, of course, all you're doing is measuring -- you're not affecting anything.

FORBES: That's right -- it's a census approach in which we go out, try to assess where we are as a nation educationally, and report that. Then, if there's something that's declining or something that's improving, or something that's just not changing, we feel like that that's information that those people who have to make policy decisions about education can make use of. But I think the thing which we have to point out is that the Blacks do not perform well in a lot of areas, and there's just absolutely no data to suggest that because they're Black we should expect them to be performing less. So, it goes back to that equal educational opportunity thing.

MERROW: What about the notion, Roy, that the National Assessment somehow is pervaded by an eastern liberal bias, and I want to quote from one of your publications from your assessment on citizenship: "The findings indicate that the educationally elite and wealthy make the best citizens; that is, perform best on the citizenship measures used by the National Assessment." And it goes on to say those people - the best citizens, in effect, seem to come from the northeast.

FORBES: Two things -- one would be someone with a southern drawl like mine should respond to the question one way. The other -- we have found that the northeast, as a region, usually performs higher than the other exceptions to the country. I guess the exception to that is that the central region performs higher than any area. The southeast usually performs down at the bottom, with central and west sort of in between. So, I'm sure that the writer of that particular document probably was referring to the fact that in looking at the data, broken down by the four regions, that the northeast is performing better than the other areas. Some hypotheses of why that is true -- the northeast has had for a number of years a very strong early childhood education program where you have kindergartens which are supported by a lot of the states.

You go to the southeast, you find just the opposite, and if it's true what we believe, that schooling does actually make a difference, then one might be suspecting that those people that have had more schooling opportunities would be able to perform at a higher level.

MERROW: You could probably have an equally promising hypothesis that income and prior education and home background are just as strong factors, and they are somehow at a higher level, more substantial level, in the northeast.

FORBES: That's true. For example, we have a very high correlation between the education level of parents and the way that the students are performing. If you look at a chart, those students whose parents went to graduate school, form at the top. Those students whose parents have a grade school level of education, form at the bottom. Again, if you look at other census-type data, you'll find that northeast and some of the other regions have a higher per capita level of education than the southeast. So, it kind of all goes together -- one bit of data supports the other.

MERROW: Roy, what finding of the National Assessment surprises you the most?

FORBES: Right at the present time, we are analyzing the reading data that we collected last year. We haven't reached the point in the analysis that we can be talking about the data, because we'd like to know exactly what error rate of the main is before we start saying too much. But I haven't seen anything in the reading data that would cause me to be overly pessimistic about what we're going to be reporting. If this holds true, then that's going to be kind of surprising, because that will be contrary to what a lot of people think is happening. I guess the results that we released around functional literacy and which showed an increase in those particular skills during that three-year period of time, also was in disagreement with what some other measures would have indicated was happening. So, I think that was surprising.

To me, it gives us a great sense of satisfaction, because a lot of people will say when we released information -- so what? Everyone already knew that. But my guess is that if I would ask people today to predict what the reading results were going to be, that they would probably say everything had declined. Or if one had asked some questions about the functional literacy, they would have suggested that it would have declined. So, I think there will be some surprises always in the National Assessment data. I don't think that it's a yes/no world in education. I think it's too complex to come up with a simple, up/down type answer.

MERROW: There is data -- some of the data, and I don't remember the skill area, but you will -- that women do well until they get out of school, but then, their skills decline, whereas the males improve their skills as they get into being adults.

FORBES: Right -- I believe there's a crossover in reading between 17-year-olds and young adults, with the men taking advantage. Up to that point, the females have been ahead. Some of the computational skills show females ahead also until later, and there's a crossover. I guess a hypothesis I could present would be that there are more men in the business world. More men have professions and, therefore, they find the need to practice certain skills, where some of the women do not have the same intensity of the need to practice the skills. And just like a lot of other things, if you're not practicing skills, you tend to lose - or they tend to degenerate over a period of time.

MERROW: What's ahead, Roy? Will the National Assessment keep on assessing year after year?

FORBES: I certainly hope so. I think that the project has to be responsive to its constructive critics. There are some areas that we need to improve on, very definitely. We're taking steps now to try to do just that. The project was designed in the mid-sixties based on some very sound theoretical knowledge, also on some pragmatic political knowledge that existed. And here we are in the middle seventies -- I think a lot of things about the design are very applicable to what we should be doing -- there are some things that should be revised.

And as we look towards the eighties, in continuing the assessment, again I look at it as not being something that's static, but something that will change slightly. But we have to remember, if we're going to be able to report change, we have to have a certain amount of stability about what it is that we're doing. So, before anybody gets overly nervous about us changing everything tomorrow, that's not the way it would happen.

BLAIR: Dr. Forbes referred to some new National Assessment results in the area of reading. Is it good news or bad, John?

MERROW: The results haven't been released yet, Wendy, but a spokesman for the National Assessment did say that there's some surprising good news in one area. The results will be out in the early Fall.

> DEAN AT MARYLAND UNIV: It is a great privilege for the University of Maryland to confer upon you the honorary Degree of Doctor of Law and to thank you very much for coming here today.

BLAIR: That was Sir Peter Ramsbotham, the British Ambassador to this country, receiving an honorary degree from the University of Maryland.

MERROW: This program on graduation wouldn't be complete if we didn't at least mention those men and women, mostly men, who will be getting their degrees this year, without having done their homework. There was an article in The Washington Post recently about honorary degrees, who's getting them and why. And the writer, one P. J. Wingate, quotes H. L. Mencken. And this is the quote:

"No decent man would accept a degree he hadn't earned. Honorary degrees are for corporation presidents, bishops, real estate agents, presidents of the United States, and other such riffraff."

BLAIR: Now, as for women, as a group they haven't done well in the competition for honorary degrees, according to Wingate. Harvard didn't give an honorary degree to a woman until it gave one to Helen Keller in 1955.

MERROW: Right now the field is wide open. Honorary degrees are conferred upon baseball players, broadcasters, actresses -- Bob Hope, for example, has more than a dozen. One of the latest recipients is Frank Sinatra.

BLAIR: Who recently received a Doctorate of Humane Letters from the University of Nevada in Las Vegas. Sinatra told university officials, "I will never forget what you have done for me today." So -- Frank Sinatra, or Dr. "Old Blue Eyes" to you. . .

(MUSIC -- "I Did It My Way")

DR. PROCTOR: I must express always a little embarrassment at this biographical summary that I prepare and mail out to everybody. I do it quite innocently, but when I hear it, it's an embarrassment. It sounds like an obituary. And I want to thank him for not reading all of those honorary degrees. You know, an honorary degree is something you get in lieu of a decent fee for a commencement speech. So, you may be impressed with honorary degrees, but all you've got to do is get through the commencement business, and you'd be surprised how rapidly you can pick them up.

BLAIR: Dr. Samuel Proctor of Rutgers University who holds twelve honorary degrees.

MERROW: You know, Wendy, a man I knew once told me that academic degrees are earned, but that honorary degrees are deserved. Needless to say, he had just gotten an honorary degree.

BLAIR: Some educators and parents are saying that the academic degrees may not be earned -- sometimes, for example, a high school diploma may be awarded to a student who attends school faithfully and never really learns much of anything.

MERROW: That degree is based on what's commonly called "seat time." Right now, though, one of the hottest issues in education is "minimum competency" -- or avoiding the "seat time" diploma. Simply put, the question is, "Should schools only graduate those students who can prove that they can read, write, and work with numbers, and should they be required to pass a comprehensive test - before they graduate?"

BLAIR: At least four states have minimum competency statutes on the books already, and a host of other states are considering similar legislation. But passing such a law may create other problems -- like what do you do with students who cannot pass the test you devise to determine the competency? Who sets the standards? Also, what do you do with students who can prove they're competent at 14 or younger? Should they be graduated that early?

Educators are debating the question of minimum competency requirements, and John talked with a number of school principals at a recent meeting in Denver on improving secondary schools. Here are their thoughts.

MERROW: This is Irene Lober from Fairfax County, Virginia. She is principal of Washington Irving Intermediate School in Fairfax, Virginia -- about 125 kids. The issue is minimum competency, setting standards for graduation. What's your position?

LOBER: I feel very strongly that on a national basis there be a minimum set of requirements established, so that the children in our country -- all children, regardless of where they live -- will end up with certain basic competency, that it should not be left to the jurisdiction to mandate. They can always add to it, but at a base level, all kids in the country will have the same skills.

MERROW: Are you saying that the federal government should set standards?

LOBER: Yes, I am.

MERROW: Can you imagine the outrage that's going to cause, the reaction that you will get to that statement?

LOBER: If you're saying that every child in this country shall be guaranteed the right to read, then it's an outrage. If you're saying that every child in this country will be guaranteed the right to be taught to compute, then it's an outrage.

MERROW: But it's not a question of whether they guarantee it -- it's a question of who gets to set the guarantees. You're saying the federal government should do it. The Constitution leaves it to the states.

LOBER: Yes, but what I'm saying now, is that with the federal government spending the money and dispensing the money, that certain guarantees have to be given to the kids.

MERROW: So, that in turn for the federal dollars, the local communities would agree that they would establish certain minimum standards for graduation from their schools.

LOBER: Right. This is coming up now at different state levels. California says that you have to have fifth grade competency. New York State has now said ninth grade -- there's a disparity. Some states may say nothing, and kids are walking out of our schools today with a zero level in some cases, and I feel that before a kid is put onto the market, for this free society to say that he's a graduate, that there be <u>some</u> baseline. And I'm not saying put the antes up so high that the kids can't graduate, but that there be <u>some</u> guarantee that before we say they're a graduate of the public school system, or whatever, that there be a certain base established.

MERROW: Tom Chaney, who is a high school principal in Tupelo, Mississippi. Mr. Chaney, your view on the question of setting minimum standards for a high school diploma.

CHANEY: John, I very strongly feel that there's a time in education when, for many reasons, we need to set some minimal competency standards, and I emphasize the word competency.

MERROW: You say for many reasons -- enumerate some of them.

CHANEY: Well, I think one is that we, as one of the state-funded agencies, we're going through a time when everybody is scrutinizing how they're spending money and what they're getting in return. I think this is one thing that is necessary for public credibility. I think it's necessary for us to clarify our own goals in education.

MERROW: Do you think there's a danger that if you set minimum standards, a lot of kids will just think that's all they have to do.

CHANEY: I'm very jealous about that prerogative among educators, and I hope that we won't be throwing the baby out with the bath water on that point, specifically. I'm very concerned about it, but I do think that if the public and educators, in general, understand that we really are talking about mi imal learning skill competency, which is maybe my own prejudice, but I think I feel this running through the minds of most educators now -- that we're on safe ground. I believe it's easily definable and will be easily understood by the public.

MERROW: Who would set the standards?

CHANEY: Well, I don't think on the basic things it's going to be very difficult to get a consensus, although I think that states have the right of regulating their own educational systems -- that is, a state right, not a federal one.

MERROW: You wouldn't let the federal government set the standards?

CHANEY: No, I don't think it should be, and it's purely a Constitutional question with me. I just don't think it's something at this time that the federal government needs to be involved with.

MERROW: Let me be specific on that question of the level of competency -- would you want it set so that almost all the kids could, in fact, reach that standard, or would you say that a high school diploma ought to be harder to get, and ought to be set so that, in fact, only 70 percent of the kids could make it?

CHANEY: I see two facets to your question - two implications. If I had to give you just one answer, I'd say that I'd want every kid that we have to be able to function at a minimal level. Now, realistically, I think if we set it at a functional level it's going to be difficult. That's not going to be an easy chore for educators, to have every student measure up to that minimal standard. I don't care where you set the hurdle, John, there are going to be some who won't jump it.

MERROW: But if you set it so that 98 or 97 percent of the kids could make it, you have to answer the argument that you're making the high school diploma so cheap that it's meaningless.

CHANEY: I don't think so -- I take exception. I think it needs to be some professional judgment about whether this is a reasonable level for an individual to function. Now, if we can do a thorough enough job -- and it's my opinion we can in these areas I'm talking about -- computational skills and communicative skills -- that that's not that difficult and those things are not that hard. How many people in our society, for example, can't walk? The mere fact that nearly a hundred percent of them can, unless there's some real physical disability, I don't think indicates that walking has become cheapened.

And I feel that way about this. I believe that if education does a good, thorough job, if it's a carefully constructed process from the time we're able to get a child into the formal education system, twelve years later, I say, that we're not doing a very thorough job if the big majority of those can't function at those levels.

MERROW: This is Gary Goff, who is principal of Brea-Olinda High School in Brea, California. California is already flirting with minimum standards -- what's your own position? What's the state's position, and then, what's your own position?

GOFF: Well, my feeling is that we need minimum academic standards when we're talking about the high school diploma. There are certain competencies which should be exhibited by a person to whom that diploma is granted, and they should be academic-based.

MERROW: You mean reading, writing, and arithmetic.

GOFF: That is correct, and I believe that in California, with the advent of the proficiency exam --

MERROW: That's the way kids can get out early.

GOFF: Not only get out early, but get out with perhaps weaknesses in some of these academic areas because of a strength in another area, and because the proficiency test does not test to the degree that we might for a diploma, these academic competencies. But I do believe, that in order to establish an academic standard, to raise the public image of public education, K through 12, that we must again establish the minimum academic proficiencies or competencies for what we now know as the high school diploma.

MERROW: Now, Gary, do you suppose that those standards should be set so low that, in fact, 99 percent of the kids will be able to make it, or would you set them higher so that only 80 percent would make it?

GOFF: I would set them higher, so that there would be those persons who would be unable to attain the high school diploma through the system as we know it today, but bear in mind, that we're locked in on societal mores on a K-12 or 13 year education span. Yet, in the past few years, we've been allowing students to complete a high school education in less than twelve years by completing high school in two, three, and three and a half. Why should not a student without stigma continue in high school until some point that he masters certain academic competencies, or why should he not receive, on an academic-based degree or diploma or certificate, at some later time in life when he attains those things - those competencies? And if he doesn't ever attain those competencies, perhaps he should not receive that degree or that certificate which suggests that he has those competencies.

MERROW: No more "seat time."

GOFF: That's correct. And I'm opposed, personally, to the student occupying a seat five days a week, 55 minutes a period, and because he's a good citizen and because he makes an effort to do homework and because he does that which is expected of him, he is passed, or moved along, and subsequently, issued a diploma, which has reached a low point of value in our society. And I don't believe that the colleges wish to give degrees to people who just occupy a seat in a college classroom. I think they want some kind of proof of competency.

MERROW: You've changed from high schools to colleges.

GOFF: Well, I'm trying to say that we ought to have it at every level of education -- a vocational school surely shouldn't validate a refrigeration expert unless he has proved his competency as one. And I would sure hate to have a United Airlines pilot who is going to take me home tomorrow skim through pilot school, or get his diploma because he was there everyday, and he was great on takeoffs, but he doesn't know how to land.

MERROW: I agree with you.

GOFF: I feel that there ought to be some basic academic competencies specifically in the areas of that which is important to being a consumer today, to being a parent today. I deal with parents on a regular basis, and I can see where parents' education 15 or 20 years ago suffered to some degree, and I'd like to change that if I could.

BLAIR: Three school principals, discussing minimum competency with John at a recent Denver meeting. What's your opinion? Do you think our schools should set minimum standards for a high school diploma, and require students to pass a comprehensive test to prove their abilities?

MERROW: Send us your opinions, and we'll report back on the results in a later program. Our address is National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D.C. 20036.

BLAIR: We'll give that address again, later in the program. Now, let's hear from some more high school graduates.

STUDENT: I hope to go to college and med school.

STUDENT: Well, I always had the idea of going to college. I never thought of not going. That's the way I was raised, I guess.

STUDENT: I'm going to get a job this summer, and then, I'm going to go to fall semester this year.

INTERVIEWER: Why are you going on to college?

STUDENT: I just don't feel like you can make it in life without a college education.

STUDENT: I want to go into space pathology, and I've always wanted to really do something with my life. And I thought that going to college would be the best opportunity.

STUDENT: I'm supposed to be going into the Army June 8th, and I don't know what after then -- maybe go to school.

INTERVIEWER: How did you decide to go into the Army?

STUDENT: Well, I didn't want to go to college right then, and there really wasn't any jobs around to be found, so I just decided to go into the Army.

STUDENT: Like I'm undecided right at the moment. I may take my registration for college just in case I decide to go to college. Right now, really I got a job waiting as a union plumber.

BLAIR: Charles Cromwell, speaking to some high school graduates in Jonesboro, Arkansas.

And now, David Selvin speaks with two graduates from Georgetown University here in Washington, D.C. Maureen Smith and Frank Meta talk about their plans for the future.

MAUREEN SMITH & FRANK META

SMITH: After four years, you're tired of school -- you're ready for something different. It's really scary, to have to find a job, to not have the security of the school to fall back on. It's a whole new world of different experiences, and I'm very hesitant to take the step.

When I started as a freshman, I believed a college degree would open up employment opportunities, and quickly, I found out that wasn't the case.

SELVIN: If you had to do it all over again, would you do it the same way?

SMITH: If I hadn't gone to college, I would have missed out on, first of all, going away from home, meeting people, just being in a college environment that's really different than working in the world. And I'm glad that I had four years of experience in that type of environment, and I feel it will be very beneficial in whatever I do in the future.

META: Without a doubt, the diploma or the certificate of graduation is definitely going to make you more marketable, if for no other reason there's, let's say, a toss-up between two people with the same background and experience. You know, if one has a college degree and the other doesn't, I think the person with the college degree has an advantage over the person that doesn't. I don't know whether it should be that way, but that's the way it is. As a graduating senior, I just received -- you know, you get some junk mail and you've got major oil companies and credit card companies sending me these form letters -- and it's, you know, Dear Frank, and everything's computerized and plugged in: "As a graduating senior at Georgetown, your credit is good with us," you know, but it's more difficult to get that credit without the college degree. It just makes a big difference.

SELVIN: You both sound very confident. You both sound like there's a lot out there to accomplish -- do you think that's a sign of the times -- do you think that's representative of -- I hate to say this -- but your generation?

META: Yeah, in some respects, and I think there's a lot of reason for it in some ways.

(MUSIC -- "Maryland")

STUDENT: This year we have reached the goal of graduating from high school. Our country has

reached the goal of existing for 200 years. As we start out on the road to success, we should always have a goal in mind, and work with all our effort to attain that goal. And most of all, we should look for happiness along the way. Thank you.

STUDENT: We are now celebrating the 200th anniversary of our Nation's independence. Do you realize how much the educational system has advanced over the past 200 years?

SPEAKER: Many of you, perhaps the majority, are graduating today from this public university, because of the progress which has been made and the substance of higher education, and the advancement of the democratic ideal.

SPEAKER: In conclusion, I want to express a confidence in this graduating class, which I'm sure is shared by all who have come to honor you. That confidence is that this graduating class will take up the challenges of tomorrow with the same joy, confidence, pride, and determination with which you have taken up yesterday's challenges. We all hope your lives will be filled with comforts of security, the warmth of affection, the exhilaration of recognition, and the eternal spring of novelty. Thank you, and I love you.

SPEAKER: You will now depart from the high school scene and embark upon a new phase of your life. Some of you will start a career. Some will enter an institution of higher learning. My sentiments can best be described in a letter I received. I want to share the letter with you at this time. It's from the White House in Washington: "To the 1976 High School Graduates: This occasion marks one of the important milestones in your life. As young Americans striving for the next milestone, you will have many choices to make. There will be many opportunities to put your energy, your intelligence, and your idealism to work. As you meet the future, you have my very best wishes for peace, prosperity, and success." And it's signed: Gerald R. Ford

STUDENT: Dear World -- Today, we the class of 1976 have been told that your future rests in our hands. Our generation is an interesting breed of individuals. We are the results of numerous and complex influences. Parents of the world, you've raised us well. Your generation taught us what was right and wrong, and why. You taught us politics and values that you steadfastly believe in today. You believe that change isn't always good, and we've learned from you. Older brothers and sisters, your generation has taught us as well. Your age group told our parents that they were wrong, and that their morals were outdated. You said that standards were relative. Your generation claimed that change was a necessity of evolution. You brought with

that change the rock and roll era, and with it, the drug culture. And we've learned from you, too.

But you see, world, our generation is a bit different. Our parents say that we're not bad, but that we're not necessarily good. Our older brothers and sisters say that we've let them down, that we've copped out. Some of our teachers are even disappointed. One instructor claimed that our generation doesn't question like the way that the last group of young people did. Older brothers and sisters of the world, teens of the sixties, we haven't let you down. Our generation still questions authority. We are very skeptical of power. Don't forget that we saw a U.S. President resign. And please, have no fear, we even question our parents' decisions every now and then.

Planet earth, we think that some day you will be proud that you entrusted your future to our generation. We believe that soon the world will look upon our generation as a new breed of young people known as thinkers. We have learned from our experiences, as well as those of the ones around us. We've realized that change is fine, but not just necessarily for the sake of change. We've learned that a good job is important, but our generation is a group that will measure success by happiness, and not by dollars and cents.

America, we've heard of questions raised by people in the past and then ignored by those in charge. We've listened closely, for we have heard the problems. But America, our generation is interested in seeking answers. Yes, world, your future is in good hands.

SPEAKER: The parents, wives, and husbands of the graduates take special pride in this occasion. You have shared in the achievements of the graduates in many ways. We invite you to stand, while we and the graduates join me in expressing our appreciation to you.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think it means for your grandson to be graduating today?

WOMAN: I feel like I'm honored today that he's graduating.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it will make it easier for him to get a job?

WOMAN: Well, he hopes to.

MAN: How do I feel about him graduating now - I feel fine.

INTERVIEWER: Are you proud?

MAN: We certainly are.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel now that it's all over?

MAN: Pretty good -- fine. Once in a lifetime you see this.

SPEAKER: Mr. Chancelor, in accordance with the recommendation of the faculty of the graduate school, I request that you confer upon these candidates the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, in recognition of the successful completion of all requirements.

SPEAKER: Associate Dean, Robert Menzer, will assist Dean Sparks in hooding the graduates. Will all graduates upon whom the doctoral degree has been conferred please move forward to receive the hood and diploma.

SPEAKER: Let us all congratulate again today's graduates.

(MUSIC)

BLAIR: We'd like to thank the graduates of the University of Maryland, Rockville High School in Rockville, Maryland, and Charles Cromwell of member station KASU in Jonesboro, Arkansas. This look at graduation, the Class of 1976, was prepared by David Selvin. If you'd like a transcript of this program, send 25 cents to National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D.C. 20036. Ask for Program #34. A cassette is available for $4.00. Before we give that address again, we'd like to ask you to help us improve OPTIONS IN EDUCATION. We'll send a questionnaire to everyone who writes us about our program, so that we can hear your views about education and this series. Write us. Our address again: National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D.C. 20036.

(MUSIC)

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BLAIR: This program is produced by Jo Ellyn Rackleff. The Executive Producer is John Merrow. For OPTIONS IN EDUCATION, I'm Wendy Blair.

CHILD: This is NPR, National Public Radio.